

THE "CASUALTIES HYPOTHESIS:" THE INFLUENCE OF NEWS MEDIA  
COVERAGE OF U.S. MILITARY DEATHS ON PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR MILITARY  
OPERATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The casualties hypothesis is cited in social science literature as a principle consideration of U.S. foreign policy decision makers and military planners when faced with the option of using military force. Its basic premise is the U.S. public will not tolerate the loss of U.S. lives in military operations. If that were always the case, however, how was it that President Bush was re-elected by a comfortable margin after the U.S. death toll in Iraq exceeded 1,000? Drawing from communication research in priming and framing, this study employs a content analysis to examine news coverage of U.S. military deaths in Iraq over a 23 month period. The resulting data are then used in an analysis of presidential approval ratings and whether the public felt the war was worth it in an effort to test the influence of media coverage on public opinion. The results indicate that media coverage of U.S. military deaths in Iraq was predominantly of an episodic and technical nature and was not significantly correlated with public opinion. Cumulative deaths in Iraq, however, were correlated with presidential approval and whether the public felt the war was worth it, lending support to the casualties hypothesis.

**Dedicated to Jennifer: For Everything**

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been faced with the decision whether to use military force in several regional uprisings. Throughout the public deliberation leading up to U.S. military involvement to the actual deployment of troops and their subsequent operations, one common theme has permeated the decision making processes and news media coverage of the operations – the proposition that the U.S. public will not tolerate the loss of U.S. soldiers' lives. What has become known as the "Vietnam effect" or the "body bag syndrome" has in the political science community been characterized as the "casualties hypothesis." Now, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. in 2001 and the resulting U.S.-led war on terrorism, the American public has been called upon to support military operations in Iraq. Coming out of a so far, very successful campaign in Afghanistan with relatively few U.S. casualties, the nation now faced a supposedly stronger army, with fewer coalition partners, and a much higher anticipated casualty rate due to the nature of the expected urban warfare. Many believed maintaining public support for the war would be nearly impossible once the U.S. death toll began to rise. Though no one has yet identified the magic number, Eikenberry (1996, p. 110) tells us such a number exists:

"It is patently impossible for a statesman to openly discuss in quantifiable terms what he deems a tolerable level of casualties – an announcement such as, 'I believe this conflict might be worth the expenditure of 50

casualties,' would hardly inspire a people or an army, but it might inspire an enemy to inflict 51 casualties. Yet the need to balance losses and gains is an element in any political leader's strategic calculations, and his conclusions will almost always be communicated implicitly, or even explicitly, to his military commanders."

We would, however, expect the number to be different for different operations, so how would a political leader or military planner know what an acceptable number would be for any given operation, and what factors would influence that number? This study, through an examination of news media coverage of U.S. casualties along with an analysis of public opinion trends, will attempt to shed light on some of the factors which may influence the way in which the public thinks about U.S. casualties, thus affecting their attitudes toward the military operations in which those casualties occur.

Drawing from research in media framing and priming, this study employed a content analysis to explore news media framing of U.S. casualties from an episodic or thematic and a technical or dramatic perspective. That coverage was then compared to public opinion survey data collected throughout a 23-month period during the war. The results, and more importantly, the implications of those results to U.S. foreign policy decision makers and military planners is discussed along with suggestions for future research in the realm of U.S. military-media relations and influences of media coverage on public opinion.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF CURRENT LITERATURE

This chapter details the theoretical foundation for this study. From the public opinion phenomenon known as the casualties hypothesis to media effects research in the areas of priming and framing, three research questions are developed to address the question of public support for the U.S.-led war in Iraq.

#### Public Opinion and Military Operations

“Among the many lessons that the U.S. military and political leaders drew from the Vietnam War, one was that the military could not deploy effectively or for a very long time without public support” (Burk, 1999, p. 53). Klarevas (2002, p.417) explained, “a simple, anecdotal recollection of which international matters have produced the most intense protests in recent American history results in those that have threatened to put American soldiers in harm’s way: Vietnam, Central America, Iraq, and Haiti.” Throughout recent history, governments have been under public pressure to intervene in “situations where fundamental human rights are being violated,” while “fearing that their citizens will not have the endurance to suffer the consequences and the casualties that action might require” (Everts, 2000, p.91). The Chinese warrior-philosopher Sun Tzu even noted the importance of public opinion when he said, “the Way means inducing the people to have the same aim as the leadership, so they will share death and share life,

without fear of danger,” in his famous work, The Art of War, as translated by Cleary (1988, p.43).

U.S. participation in peace keeping operations in Lebanon, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo has been the focus of public opinion studies throughout the political science literature. Klarevas (2002) called public opinion the “essential domino” of military operations and explored factors that influence public support for such operations. Hyde (2000), J. Mueller (2000), K. Mueller (2000), Everts (2000), and Balshaw (2001) all looked at U.S. public opinion as a constraint to foreign policy and explored ways in which public opinion has affected policy decisions and military planning. Klarevas (2002, p.418) emphasizes the importance of public opinion when he states:

“Because American public opinion regarding the use of force is highly palpable, salient, and organized, and because decisions regarding the use of force are some of the most important decisions the nation ever has to consider, the analysis of public opinion regarding military involvement is academically significant and policy relevant.”

#### Casualties Hypothesis

Present in each of the studies listed above is a central theme that the U.S. public will not support military peace keeping operations that involve the potential for a significant loss of U.S. lives. This proposition, known as the “casualties hypothesis,” was thought to have strong influence in foreign policy decisions about whether to use military force. It is important to note here that although the U.S. military includes injuries in its definition and use of the term casualties, the “casualties hypothesis,” as it is discussed here, and the term casualties as it will be used in the remainder of this research proposal, refers to actual fatalities in combat operations or in direct support of combat operations.

The hypothesis simply claims according to Burk (1999, p.56), "that American public opinion at present will not support the deployment of military forces abroad if that deployment results in the lives of American soldiers being lost." He continues, "we have strong evidence that Americans think the risk of casualties is a crucial, perhaps the most important, factor affecting their support of a decision to use armed force."

Luttwak (1994, p.27) defends the casualties hypothesis by asserting that many industrialized nations such as France, Germany, and the United States "still possess the physical attributes of military strength or the economic base to develop such strength, but their societies are so allergic to casualties that they are effectively debellized or nearly so." In other words, even the governments of the most powerful countries are unable to effectively use, or even threaten to use military force out of fear that their publics will not support them. Luttwak continues, "aside from self defense and exceptional cases, á la the Persian Gulf War, only such conflict as can take place without soldiers is likely to be tolerated."

Burk (1999), K. Mueller (2000), and Hyde (2000) however, each discount the casualties hypothesis as being too simplistic, and in fact, Mueller calls it a myth or a cult implying that there is much more at work in the ebb and flow of public opinion than simply the number of U.S. lives lost in a particular engagement. Klarevas (2002) provides a review of the schools of thought in the literature about why the mass public supports the use of military force, and in it offers several alternatives to the casualties hypothesis to include the interests at stake, elite consensus, multilateralism, the rally-round-the-flag effect, etc. In his discussion on casualties as a factor in public opinion development, Klarevas refers to the loss of life as a part of a cost-benefit analysis of the overall effort

rather than the simply stated hypothesis that the U.S. public will not tolerate casualties. The hypothesis is too simply stated, too generalized, and unjustifiably absolute. If it were true, the public could hardly support any routine military operations or training at home or abroad. However, as Hyde (2000) points out, the perception that the U.S. public will not tolerate casualties is a key factor in military planning and in the effectiveness of military deterrence. He makes the case that in the first U.S. war with Iraq, Sadaam Hussein did not back down, not because he thought he could defeat the U.S. militarily, but because he thought his forces could inflict enough casualties to diminish the U.S.' will to fight.

Klarevas, and the others mentioned above, examine the decision making processes of the political elite and military planners and the public deliberation for or against the use of force, and present a solid argument that public support is essential to successful military operations. Further, although they dispute the casualties hypothesis in its simple form, they do provide evidence that U.S. casualties are a key determinant in winning and maintaining public support and is a key concern of policy makers and military planners. What they fail to explore, however, is the influence of the medium through which the public receives information about military operations, and more importantly to their support, casualties. Communication research in priming and framing provides evidence of news media influence on public opinion and holds the potential to offer at least some explanation of the variability in public support for military operations as not yet explored in social science research.



## Priming

Briefly, priming effects research has been conducted predominantly to learn about how people evaluate political candidates and public policy issues. Kosicki (2002, p.69) defines priming as a media effects hypothesis that “suggests that the news media stress certain considerations, and not others, in their news materials about public policies or candidates for office. In so doing, media alter the standards by which these policies or candidates for office are evaluated.” He also reminds us of Price’s and Tewksbury’s (1997) assertion that priming refers to the tendency of audience members to evaluate their political leaders according to the particular events and issues that have been highlighted in news reports.

Miller and Krosnick (2000, p.302) posit that “if a political issue is activated in people’s memories by media attention to it, they presumably use the concept when asked to make political judgments – not by conscious choice, but merely because information about the issue appears automatically and effortlessly in consciousness.” In other words, the public tends to consider the most recent information covered in the news about a particular issue when asked to give an evaluation. Therefore, by choosing what information to include, and as importantly, to exclude, the news media influence the criteria used by the public when evaluating a certain political elite or a public policy issue. Thus, if the news media choose to focus on U.S. casualties, out of all the other stories they could cover regarding a military operation, it would seem plausible that members of the public would attribute more importance to casualties when asked to respond to a question about their support for that operation. This leads to our first research question:

RQ 1: How much attention do the news media give to U.S. deaths in their coverage of the U.S.-led war in Iraq compared to the total amount of coverage of the war and the actual occurrences of deaths, and has that coverage changed over time?

### Framing

Following from the idea that the news media shape the public's perception of the important factors to consider when evaluating an event or issue is a concern that the media may also shape *how* the public thinks about those factors. Framing effects research has focused on how people use primary frameworks to make sense of their experiences and information (Goffman, 1974), and how media use frames as "central organizing ideas or story lines that provide meaning" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987 as cited in Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p.57). Entman (2003, p.417) points out: "framing entails selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution." By providing saliency to one aspect or another of an issue, the news media can be influential in shaping how the public thinks about the issue.

Iyengar (1987) and Iyengar and Simon (1993) took a slightly different approach and looked at how the news media framed certain events and issues as either thematic or episodic, and how public attribution of responsibility for the issue varied depending upon the frame. They posited that thematic coverage of an event or issue, coverage that considers the event within the context of an overall issue, tended to lead to public attribution of responsibility to societal institutions. Conversely, episodic coverage, coverage of the event that does not place it in any larger context, tended to lead to public attribution to personal responsibility. Iyengar and Simon (1993, p. 370) argued, "it is to

be expected that the networks rely extensively on episodic framing to report on public issues. Episodic framing is visually appealing and consists of on-the-scene, live coverage. Thematic coverage, which requires interpretive analyses, would simply crowd out other news items." But, when would the media turn to thematic coverage of an issue? There is some evidence that as information moves from administrative organizations to political organizations, the increased debate in the political sphere sparks more news media coverage of the issue.

Nisbet, Brossard, and Kroepsch (2003, p.37) explored how scientific issues "gain, maintain, or lose political and media attention," and found that "increased media attention coincides with the potential of an issue to be framed in dramatic terms" related to "political strategy, conflict and ethics, and morality." Thus, scientific information contained within "administrative policy areas such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)," remains technical and is debated among "experts." Once the debate moves from the technical or administrative arenas, however, and into public arenas such as Congress they are "open to a great diversity of interest group involvement," and "arguments based on morality often win out over instrumental or rational values."

This idea of technical versus dramatic frames stems from the *problem definition* perspective in studies of public policy making. Rochefort and Cobb (1994) explained that problems can be defined in either an instrumental or an expressive manner. Instrumental definitions tend to focus on the end goal, whereas expressive definitions focus on the means to achieve those ends. In their chapter on AIDS policymaking, they carefully

outline the instrumental approach to preventing the spreading of AIDS by distributing sterile needles to drug users or handing out condoms in public schools. Opposition groups took an expressive definition and argued the moral inconsistencies with the proposed methods to include positing that such methods would encourage the immoral or illicit behavior that was causing the AIDS problem in the first place. Such use of an expressive definition is typically implemented to garner expanded support for a position. By attacking the moral implications of the proposed methods for combating the spread of AIDS, opposition groups were able to galvanize the support of more affluent communities and religious organizations, and thus have greater influence in the shaping of public policy regarding the disease.

Continuing with this theme, Nelkin (1995) discussed public perception of science as being influenced by moral arguments. While technical issues matter to scientists, the political sphere deals with the moral implications of scientific research, and as issues move into this sphere, they become contested by various interest groups vying to gain public support to influence policy decisions. In this moral, and more dramatic realm, the issue is much more likely to gain news media coverage.

Linsky (1986) found that the government agency within which the information was being considered or debated also influenced the amount of press coverage it would receive. Issues related to foreign policy in the State Department, for example, could expect to garner a lot of coverage while issues originating in the Department of Agriculture were less likely to be covered, unless they moved to a more political sphere such as the White House or Congress.

Following from these studies, information concerning U.S. deaths in the U.S.-led war with Iraq can be thought of as episodic or thematic and technical or dramatic in nature. We would expect to find information of a technical, and more episodic nature in a Pentagon press briefing, a simple raw number provided with whatever details are available about the circumstances in which those specific casualties occurred. The casualties would be framed as almost incidental to the broader story about the operation. So, a lead paragraph might read, "two U.S. soldiers died today when the vehicle in which they were riding was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade." We would expect to find information about casualties of a dramatic and a more thematic nature in a political environment such as a Congressional debate or, and this is especially applicable this year, in a presidential campaign. In either of these forums we would expect casualties to be depicted in a more dramatic nature with arguments about the acceptability of casualties or the policy decisions being blamed for the casualties. Many more qualifiers would be present in the rhetoric about casualties rather than merely reporting raw, factual numbers. An example of a lead paragraph from this type of forum would be, "two U.S. soldiers died today when their vehicle was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade. This brings the total number of U.S. deaths to 82 this month in an increasingly aggressive insurgency which presidential candidate Senator John Kerry attributed to 'President Bush's failed policy in the region.'"

If we then consider Iyengar's assertion that episodic and thematic coverage of events or issues influences to whom the public attributes responsibility, and the predominance given an issue in the media based upon its technical or dramatic nature, a second research question follows:

RQ 2: Do the news media frame U.S. deaths incurred in the U.S.-led war in Iraq in an episodic or thematic and technical or dramatic nature, and has that coverage changed over time?

As this is a proposed study regarding public opinion toward military operations, it is important to consider a third research question related to the media effects concepts:

RQ 3: Has U.S. public support for the U.S.-led war in Iraq changed with both the amount and frames of news media coverage of U.S. deaths.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

This chapter discusses the research methods to be used to include a content analysis and an analysis of public opinion data. Sampling procedures will be outlined describing methods employed to obtain a representative sample of news media content followed by a discussion on the coding procedures. Further, the combining and analyzing of public opinion data from three reputable polling organizations will be described.

#### Research Questions

It would be helpful here to restate the research questions:

RQ 1: How much attention do the news media give to U.S. deaths in their coverage of the U.S.-led war in Iraq compared to the total amount of coverage of the war and the actual occurrences of deaths, and has that coverage changed over time?

RQ 2: Do the news media frame U.S. deaths incurred in the U.S.-led war in Iraq in an episodic or thematic and technical or dramatic nature, and has that coverage changed over time?

RQ 3: Has U.S. public support for the U.S.-led war in Iraq changed with both the amount and frames of news media coverage of U.S. deaths.

Two methods of analysis were employed to answer these questions: a content analysis of news transcripts and an analysis of public opinion data trends from three polling organizations. The content analysis was conducted to determine the amount of

coverage given U.S. deaths and the predominant frames used in that coverage. The public opinion data were collected to determine public support for the president and the war itself. Also, actual casualty totals were obtained for comparison with the media coverage and public opinion data.

### Content Analysis

A content analysis of 994 news transcripts from a 23 month period (January 2003 through November 2004) was conducted to determine the amount of coverage given U.S. military deaths in Iraq and the frames used in that coverage. The time period was chosen to provide a longitudinal glimpse at media coverage through several significant events: the pre-war deliberation; the beginning of combat operations; the declaration of an end to major hostilities; the capture of Sadaam Hussein; the rise of the insurgency; the transfer of authority to the interim Iraqi government; the U.S.-led assaults on the city of Falluja; and the U.S. presidential election. The sample of transcripts was taken from each of the three predominant media spectrums: broadcast network news, cable news, and print news. Available time and resources limited the number of news organizations used for the study, so one organization was selected for each type.

CNN archives its transcripts differently than the other news organizations making comparisons of coverage difficult. Therefore, Fox News Network was chosen for the cable news organization. Specifically, transcripts were chosen from the "Special Report with Brit Hume" program, because it airs during the same time as the network evening news programs and is similar in format. Since Fox News is considered by many to be more conservative in its reporting, CBS Evening News was chosen for the broadcast network organization as it is often considered to be more liberal in its reporting. The New



York Times was chosen as the print organization, because of its national audience which is similar to the television news organizations (Cho, Boyle, Keum, Shevy, McLeod, Shah, & Pan, 2003).

### *Sampling Procedures*

Due to available time, it was decided that no more than 1,000 transcripts would be analyzed. A key-word search was conducted using the Lexis-Nexis Academic database to obtain transcripts from the New York Times, CBS, and Fox.<sup>1</sup> A proportional random sample was then taken from each organization for each month in the analysis. This was accomplished by first determining the percentage each month's total number of transcripts contributed to the entire 23 months' worth for that organization and then multiplying by 600 for the New York Times and 200 each for CBS and Fox. The Lexis-Nexis search results were sorted in descending order by date. Random digits were then generated using Microsoft Excel, and the corresponding transcripts were chosen for analysis.

As the selected transcripts were being downloaded and read, it was found that a large number of them did not mention U.S. military deaths. At this point, coding was halted, and different combinations of key-words were substituted in an attempt to weed out more of the irrelevant articles. Each attempt, however, resulted in either too many relevant articles being deleted from, or too many irrelevant articles being added to the results. Therefore, the decision was made to use the original search terms, and the author and an independent coder then read each transcript and marked the transcript numbers of

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<sup>1</sup> Key words: [Iraq\* or "Sadr City" or "Falluja" or "Mosul" or "Tikrit" or "Baghdad" or "Basra" or "Kirkuk" or "Balad" or "Ar Ramadi" or "Al Hilla" or "Kuwait"] in full text, and w/25 ["killed" or "died" or death\* or "dead" or casualt\*\*\*] in full text.

those that were relevant to the study. The relevant transcript numbers were then listed sequentially for each month, and random digits were again generated in Microsoft Excel. This time, however, the random digits corresponded to the position on the list of transcripts, and not to the actual transcript number. For example, the randomly generated number, "three," corresponded to the third transcript number on the list for that month.

This method resulted in 602 relevant transcripts from the New York Times, 197 from CBS Evening News, and 195 from Fox News' Special Report with Brit Hume for a total of 994 transcripts analyzed.

### *Coders*

The author and an independent coder analyzed the transcripts using the coding sheet at Appendix A. The author met with the independent coder and explained the coding scheme using 10 transcripts as examples. Then, both the author and independent coder analyzed 10 additional transcripts separately and met again to establish an initial inter-coder reliability. The Cohen's Kappa across the different items on the coding sheet was above .70, so the author and independent coder began analyzing transcripts from the sample.

### *Frames*

How the news media framed coverage of U.S. military deaths in Iraq was the primary focus of the content analysis. Transcripts were coded to determine the predominance of episodic versus thematic frames and technical versus dramatic frames.

Episodic frames were defined as reports of U.S. military deaths as isolated events absent of greater context about overall war effort, escalating violence, political debate,

etc. For example, “two U.S. soldiers died in Iraq today when their vehicle was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade.”

Thematic frames were defined as reports of U.S. military deaths within the context of the overall war effort, escalating violence, political debate, etc. For example, casualties reported with total number of U.S. deaths, death rate, “deadliest day” (or week or month). This might read as, “two U.S. Marines were killed near Baghdad today bringing the total number of U.S. dead to 150.”

Technical frames were defined as factual coverage of U.S. military deaths without dramatization or personalization. This type of coverage would be raw numbers, detail of events, lists of names, hometowns, etc. The previous examples for both episodic and thematic frames would also be considered technical.

Dramatic frames were defined as coverage of U.S. military deaths including subjective qualifiers such as: horrible, terrible, increasingly violent, deadly, unnecessary, wasteful, unexpected, heroic, etc. Personalization, such as human interest stories about surviving family members, mourning communities, lost potential would also be identified as dramatic coverage. Further, dramatic coverage can be considered to have two sub-dimensions: positive and negative.

Each type of frame was coded as 0 = not present, 1 = present, but not focus or lead, and 2 = outstanding focus or lead of story. Additionally, coders recorded the format of the story (news article, opinion editorial, etc.), main focus of the story (war coverage, domestic politics, etc.), and the prominence of the story (lead story or front page). Resulting data were then entered into SPSS for statistical analysis.

### *Inter-Coder Reliability*

The independent coder analyzed 223 of the 994 transcripts. The author coded 33, or 15 percent, of those 223 transcripts to establish inter-coder reliability. Table 3.1 provides the Cohen's Kappa for each news frame.<sup>2</sup> The weakest reliability coefficient, but still in the acceptable range, was on the Thematic frame with a Kappa of .65. This frame required more subjective judgment on the part of the coders and therefore was expected to be a little lower than the other frames. The opposite was true for Positive Valence of Dramatic frames with an observed agreement of .91, but a Kappa of .01.

Frame	Observed Agreement	Cohen's Kappa
Episodic	.82	.72
Thematic	.82	.65
Technical	.85	.77
Dramatic	.91	.80
Negative	.91	.79
Positive	.91	.01

Table 3.1: Inter-Coder Reliability

### *Public Opinion Data*

Public opinion reports were gathered from Gallup (2004 & 2005), ABC/Washington Post (2005), and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2005). Specifically, public opinion data were collected from four questions consistently

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<sup>2</sup> Formula for arriving at Cohen's Kappa:  $P_{obs} - P_{exp} / 1 - P_{exp}$ , where  $P_{obs}$  = Percent Observed Agreement,  $P_{exp}$  = Percent Expected Agreement.

asked among the different polling organizations: 1) do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president, 2) do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling the situation in Iraq, 3) all in all, do you think it was worth going to war in Iraq, or not (asked by ABC/Washington Post and Gallup), and 4) do you think going to war in Iraq was the right decision or wrong decision (asked by Pew only).<sup>3</sup> Each report listed monthly trends for each of the four questions, so approval ratings were obtained from the beginning of the war in March 2003 through November 2004 to correspond with the resulting data from the content analysis. Where more than one survey was reported for a single month, an average was taken for that month.

Weighted averages among the three polling organizations were calculated by multiplying the approval (or "yes" in the case of whether the war was worth it or the right decision) rating by the N for each organization (Pew=1,500, ABC/Washington Post=1,000, Gallup=1,000), summing the resulting proportions, and then dividing by the total N (3,500 for questions asked of all three organizations and 2,500 for the "war worth it" question asked only by ABC/Washington Post and Gallup). For the Pew Center-only question, was going to war the right decision, weighted averages were not calculated.

In cases where data were missing, weighted averages were taken from the remaining organizations with available data. In cases where data were missing from all three organizations, data were imputed by averaging the weighted average of the month immediately preceding and the month immediately following the missing case. This

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<sup>3</sup> On the question, "all in all, do you think it was worth going to war in Iraq?" ABC/Washington Post and Gallup used slightly different wording. ABC/Washington Post used, "on another subject, all in all, considering the costs to the United States versus the benefits to the United states, do you think the war with Iraq was worth fighting, or not? Do you feel that way strongly or somewhat?" The net approval rating was used when calculating the weighted average with the ABC/Washington Post data.

method is better than simply taking the mean of the entire data series in that it takes data from the nearest measurement points and thus has less impact on the variation of the data in the series.<sup>4</sup> Tables 3.2 and 3.3 list the public opinion weighted averages for the months analyzed in 2003 and 2004 respectively.

2003	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Presidential Job Approval	.66	.72	.65 <sup>a</sup>	.64	.59	.58	.54	.53	.53	.57
President's Handling of Iraq	.68	.75	.70 <sup>b</sup>	.65 <sup>c</sup>	.58 <sup>d</sup>	.57 <sup>e</sup>	.51	.48 <sup>f</sup>	.47 <sup>g</sup>	.55 <sup>h</sup>
War Worth It	.68 <sup>i</sup>	.71	.66 <sup>j</sup>	.60	.62	.61	.56	.55	.54	.59
War Right Decision <sup>k</sup>	.72	.73	.74	.71 <sup>l</sup>	.67	.63	.63	.60	.64 <sup>m</sup>	.67

Table 3.2: Public opinion weighted averages for 2003

<sup>a</sup> No data from ABC/Washington Post. Weighted average was calculated using Gallup and Pew Center data.

<sup>b</sup> No data available. The value was imputed by averaging the weighted averages for April and June.

<sup>c-h</sup> Data missing from Pew Center. Weighted average was calculated using ABC/Washington Post and Gallup data.

<sup>i</sup> No data from ABC/Washington Post. Value is from Gallup data only.

<sup>j</sup> No data available. The value was imputed by averaging the weighted average from April and June.

<sup>k</sup> Values are from the Pew Center only.

<sup>l</sup> No data available. Value was calculated by averaging May and July.

<sup>m</sup> No data available. Value was calculated by averaging October and December.

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<sup>4</sup> Only two values (less than 10 percent of the total) were imputed in this manner: May 2003 for the president's handling of the situation in Iraq, and May 2003 for whether going to war was worth it.

2004	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov
Presidential Job Approval	.57	.49	.49	.49	.46	.48	.48	.48	.52 <sup>n</sup>	.48	.54 <sup>o</sup>
President's Handling of Iraq	.56	.47 <sup>p</sup>	.49 <sup>q</sup>	.45	.41 <sup>r</sup>	.43	.43 <sup>s</sup>	.45	.47	.41 <sup>t</sup>	.47 <sup>u</sup>
War Worth It	.55	.48 <sup>v</sup>	.54	.51	.48	.47	.48	.49	.49	.47	... <sup>w</sup>
War Right Decision <sup>x</sup>	.64	.58	.55	.54	.51	.55	.52	.53	.53	.48	.48

Table 3.3: Public opinion weighted averages for 2004

<sup>n</sup> No data from the Pew Center. Weighted average was calculated using ABC/Washington Post and Gallup data.

<sup>o</sup> No data from ABC/Washington Post or the Pew Center. Value is from Gallup only.

<sup>p</sup> No data from the Pew Center or Gallup. Value is from ABC/Washington Post only.

<sup>q</sup> No data from the Pew Center. Weighted average was calculated using ABC/Washington Post and Gallup data.

<sup>r</sup> No data from the Pew Center. Weighted average was calculated using ABC/Washington Post and Gallup data.

<sup>s</sup> No data from Gallup. Weighted average was calculated using ABC/Washington Post and the Pew Center data.

<sup>t</sup> No data from ABC/Washington Post. Weighted average was calculated using Gallup and the Pew Center data.

<sup>u</sup> No data from ABC/Washington Post or the Pew Center. Value is from Gallup only.

<sup>v</sup> No data from Gallup. Value is from ABC/Washington Post only.

<sup>w</sup> No data available. Also, no data from December 2004 to average. Mean of series is .50, but given the downward trend, the determination was made to list this value as "missing."

<sup>x</sup> Values are from the Pew Center only.

## U.S. Death Toll in Iraq

The website, <http://www.icasualties.org> tracks U.S. and U.K. casualties in Iraq per month. Their sources include U.S. Department of Defense releases. Table 3.4 lists the number of U.S. military deaths in Iraq per month taken from this website and the cumulative number of deaths per month. It is important to note the two highest-casualty months were April and November 2004 when the U.S. led major assaults on the contested city of Falluja.

Month / Year	Deaths Per Month	Cumulative Deaths
Mar 03	65	65
Apr 03	74	139
May 03	37	176
Jun 03	30	206
Jul 03	47	253
Aug 03	35	288
Sep 03	31	319
Oct 03	44	363
Nov 03	82	445
Dec 03	40	485
Jan 04	47	532
Feb 04	20	552
Mar 04	52	604
Apr 04	135	739
May 04	80	819
Jun 04	42	861
Jul 04	54	915
Aug 04	66	981
Sep 04	80	1061
Oct 04	63	1124
Nov 04	137	1261

Table 3.4: U.S. Military Deaths in Iraq



## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

This chapter reports the results obtained from the content analysis and the analysis of public opinion data. The amount of news media coverage given U.S. deaths in Iraq compared to the actual number of deaths and the total amount of coverage on the war is given along with monthly trends in overall media coverage and public opinion ratings.

#### Content Analysis

##### *Amount of Coverage Given U.S. Deaths*

Figure 4.1 addresses the first research question in that it demonstrates the amount of coverage given U.S. deaths by the New York Times, CBS Evening News, and Fox News' Special Report with Brit Hume. Interestingly, the coverage remains fairly constant even as the number of deaths fluctuate. Overall, coverage remains proportional to the actual number of deaths, indicating that the news media are not focusing an excessive amount of attention on U.S. deaths.

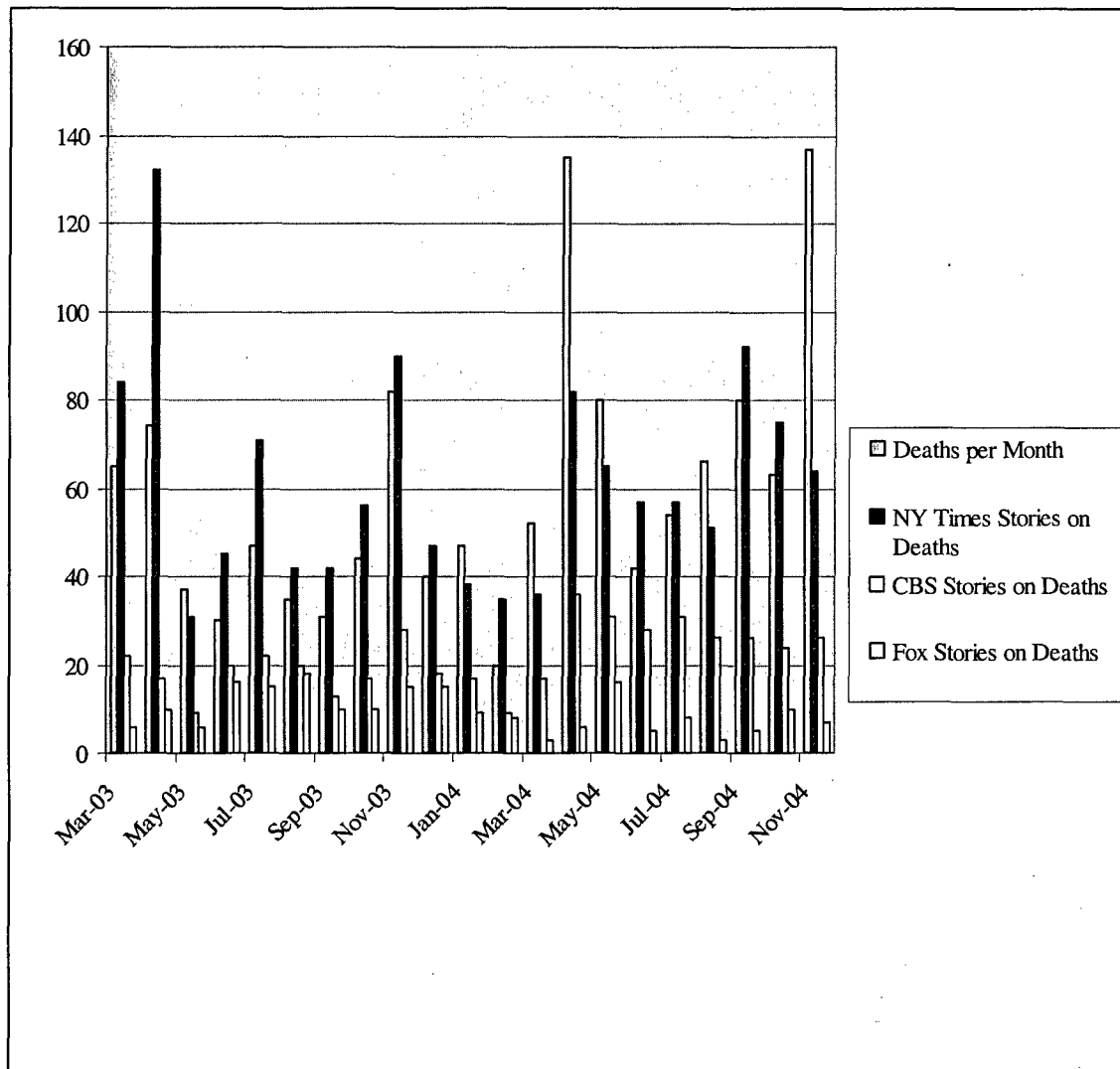


Figure 4.1: Number of stories about U.S. deaths in Iraq compared to actual number of deaths

Additionally, only 11 percent of the total news media coverage of the war in Iraq<sup>5</sup> was about U.S. deaths.<sup>6</sup> This proportion remained fairly consistent throughout the time period analyzed as is demonstrated in Figure 4.2.

<sup>5</sup> 1,950 out of 17,494 news transcripts for the time period analyzed.

<sup>6</sup> A key-word search was conducted in the Lexis-Nexis Academic database using "Iraq" as the search term in "headline / lead paragraph." Other search criteria mirrored the criteria for the content analysis. The

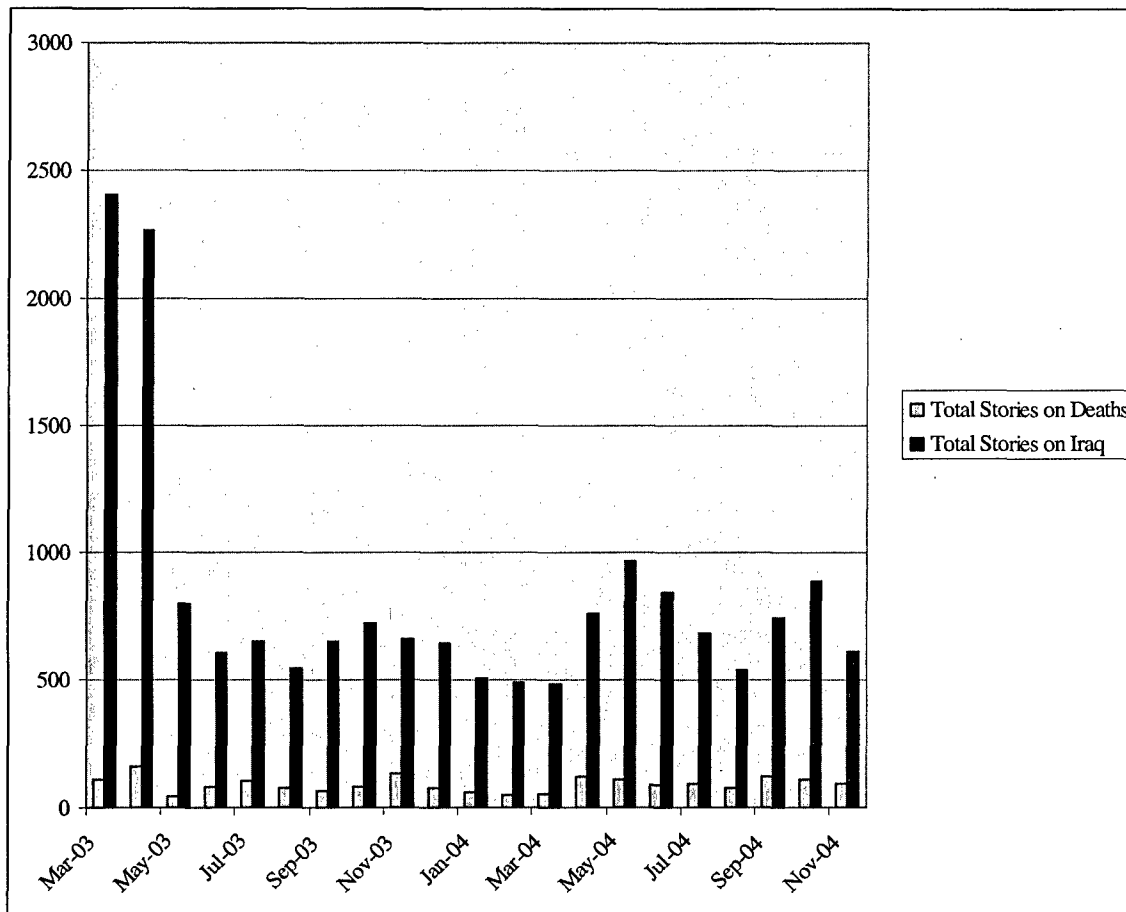


Figure 4.2: Number of stories on U.S. deaths in Iraq compared to total number of stories on Iraq.

These results clearly indicate that the news media in general did not focus solely on the loss of U.S. lives in their coverage of the Iraq war. Following from research in media priming then, the assumption could be made that casualties would perhaps not be the first consideration to which people refer when asked their opinion of the war.

resulting total number of stories per month were then used to compute the proportion of stories about U.S. deaths in Iraq.

### Overall Coverage

Overall, news media coverage of U.S. deaths in Iraq was found to be predominantly episodic and technical in nature. In other words, the news media tended to report U.S. deaths as isolated events in a dry, factual manner with little sensationalism or dramatic influence. Figure 4.3 indicates the mean coverage for the months analyzed (January 2003 through November 2004) with error bars included (N=994).<sup>7</sup>

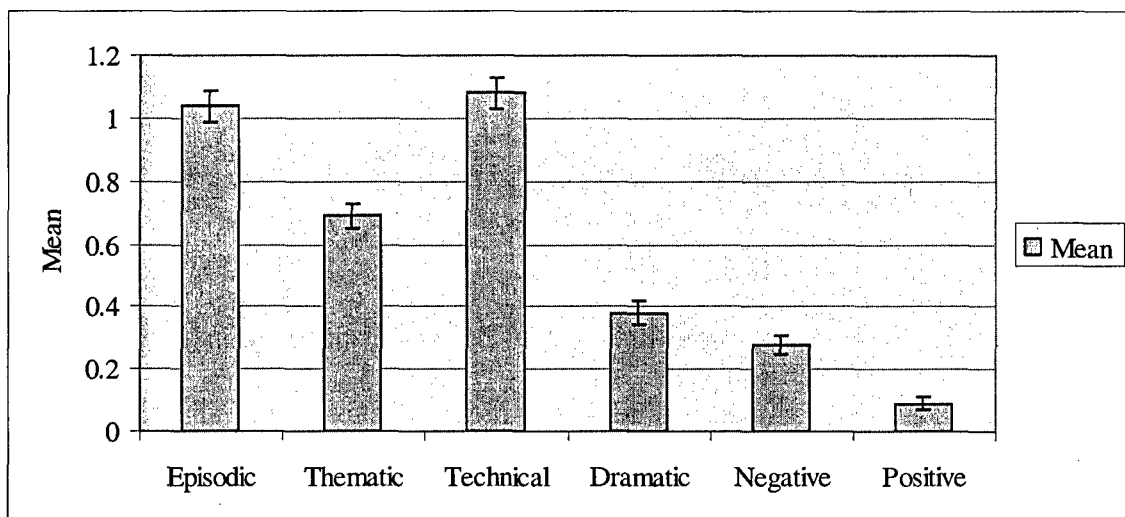


Figure 4.3: Mean Coverage of U.S. Military Deaths in Iraq

The mean coverage also indicates that U.S. military deaths were seldom the main focus or the lead of the news transcripts. Rather, the news media typically mentioned U.S. deaths as almost an aside. For example, “elsewhere in Iraq today, two U.S. soldiers were killed in a skirmish with Iraqi forces.” As such, the frame was coded as a 1, or present, but not the focus or lead of the story. When U.S. military deaths were the lead or

<sup>7</sup> Resulting data from the content analysis were entered into SPSS. Using the “explore” function, means and standard errors were determined with a 95 percent confidence interval.

main focus of a story, they were still typically reported in an episodic and technical manner.

There were noticeable differences between the manner in which news media reported actual U.S. military deaths and the manner in which journalists discussed U.S. deaths within in-house editorials in print media or interviews with other reporters or commentators in cable and broadcast media. Figures 4.2 and 4.3 demonstrate the differences in coverage of actual deaths versus in-house editorials or interviews with other reporters or commentators respectively.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note, however, that there were dramatically fewer in-house editorials and television interviews with other reporters or commentators than there were straight news reports.

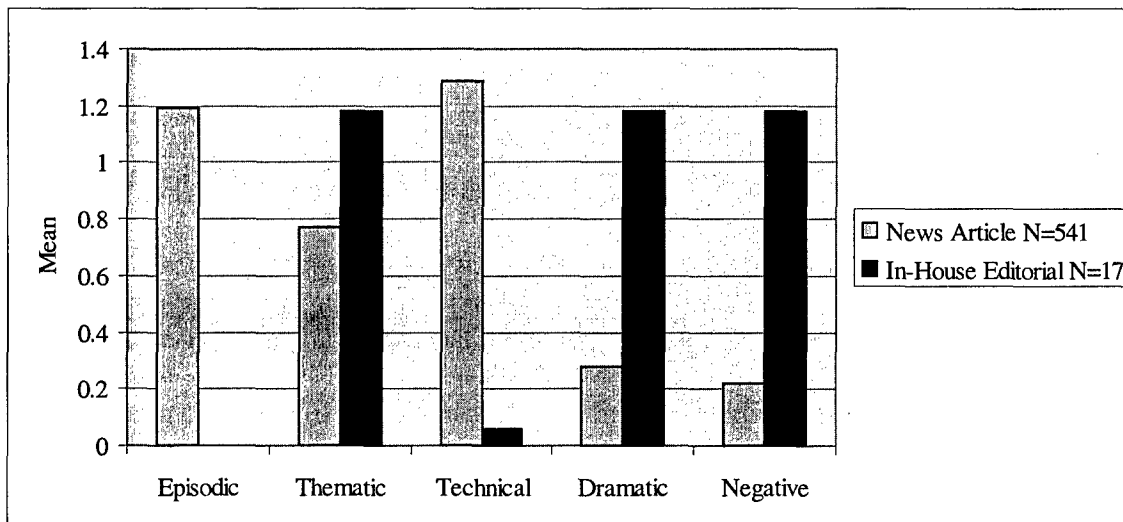


Figure 4.4: News Articles versus In-House Editorials

<sup>8</sup> An Independent Samples T-Test was conducted. Each difference is significant at the  $<.05$  level for Episodic, Thematic, Technical, Dramatic, and Negative frames. There were no significant differences for Positive frames.

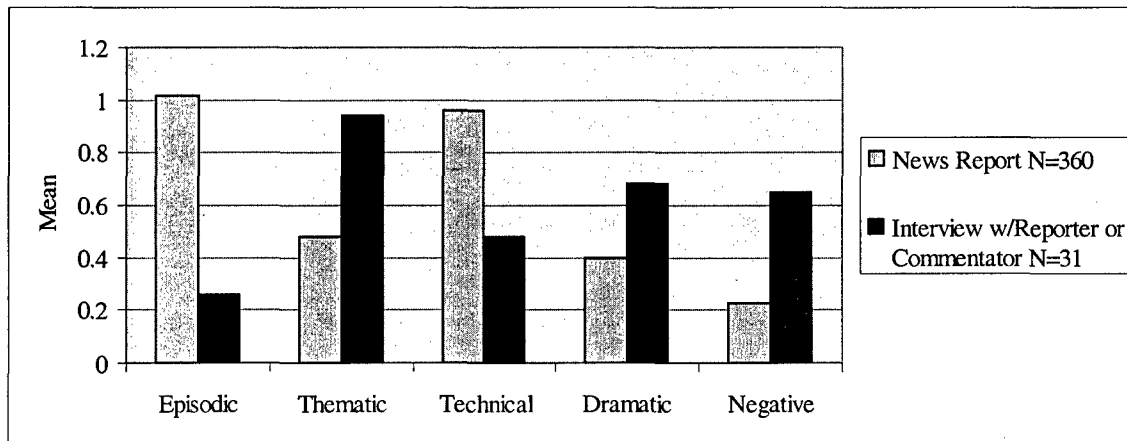


Figure 4.5: News Reports versus Interviews with other Reporters or Commentators

There were some differences in coverage between the news organizations. Table 4.1 demonstrates the mean coverage for each organization with significant differences at the  $<.05$  level indicated<sup>9</sup>.

	New York Times (a)	CBS Evening News (b)	Fox News' Special Report (c)
Episodic	1.10 <sub>c</sub>	1.17 <sub>c</sub>	.73 <sub>ab</sub>
Thematic	.80 <sub>bc</sub>	.58 <sub>ac</sub>	.46 <sub>ab</sub>
Technical	1.19 <sub>bc</sub>	.98 <sub>ac</sub>	.86 <sub>ab</sub>
Dramatic	.36 <sub>bc</sub>	.60 <sub>ac</sub>	.24 <sub>ab</sub>
Negative	.30	.29	.22
Positive	.06 <sub>b</sub>	.23 <sub>ac</sub>	.03 <sub>b</sub>

Table 4.1: Differences in News Coverage of U.S. Deaths Between News Organizations<sup>y</sup>

<sup>y</sup> Subscripts within the table indicate significant differences at the  $<.05$  level between news organizations. For example, for Episodic, New York Times and CBS were both statistically different from Fox, but not from each other. Likewise all three organizations were statistically different for Thematic and Technical, and none of the organizations were statistically different for Negative.

<sup>9</sup> An Independent Samples T-test was conducted. Differences are significant at the  $<.05$  level.

As one might expect given the amount of space and time available, the print organization tended to be more thematic in its coverage than the television news organizations; however, it still remained highly technical in nature. A typical article in the New York Times, for example, would list the names of the dead that were released by the Department of Defense and would normally include the total number of dead in the war to date.

A rather interesting difference is between CBS and Fox in their use of dramatic frames in covering U.S. deaths. Some might argue this difference is a result of the ideological slants of each organization, but the design of this study does not make possible such a conclusion. It does, however, indicate a significant difference that perhaps should be explored further. While the difference between CBS and the New York Times on the dramatic frame is also significant, one might expect television news to be more dramatic in nature due to its need to attract and hold viewer attention.

News coverage of U.S. deaths became slightly more episodic in nature in 2004 than in 2003 ( $\hat{y}_{2003} = .95$ ,  $\hat{y}_{2004} = 1.14$ ,  $t = -3.845$ ,  $df = 992$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but otherwise, and somewhat surprisingly, there were no significant differences in coverage of U.S. deaths as the war continued into the election year.

#### *Coverage by Month*

When examining news media coverage of U.S. deaths in Iraq by month, the sample size became significantly smaller, thus increasing the standard error of each mean. However, breaking out media coverage per month makes possible the comparison of coverage to actual U.S. deaths per month and various indicators of public support for the president and for the war, so it is worth exploring here. It is important to note that the

sample size for January and February 2003, before the war actually started, was too small to produce meaningful data. Many of the transcripts examined discussed the possibility of U.S. casualties in a war with Iraq, but did not specifically mention the possibility of deaths. Considering the word, "casualties," is frequently used to mean injuries of any kind, those articles were not included in the content analysis, leaving only seven transcripts for January and eight for February that did discuss the potential for U.S. deaths. Therefore, the few data that were recorded for January and February 2003 have been excluded from further analysis here. Additionally there were so few dramatic frames with a positive valence, that it is not useful to include that data for any further analysis, and therefore, the negative valence data will also be excluded. This will leave the four primary frames under study to be analyzed: episodic, thematic, technical, and dramatic.

Figures 4.6 and 4.7 demonstrate the trend of coverage of U.S. deaths in Iraq for episodic versus thematic frames and technical versus dramatic frames with error bars<sup>10</sup> for the three media organizations combined. Again, coverage overall tended to be more episodic and technical in nature.

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<sup>10</sup> Means and margins of error were calculated in SPSS with a 95 percent confidence interval.



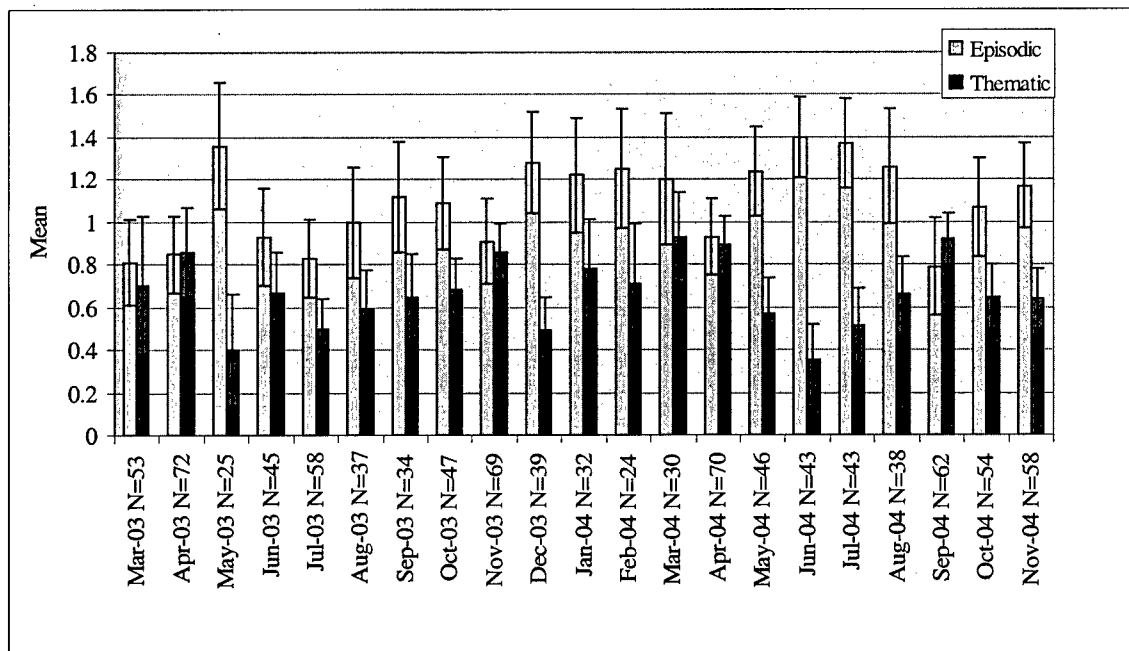


Figure 4.6: Episodic versus Thematic Coverage by Month<sup>z</sup>

<sup>z</sup> All media combined.

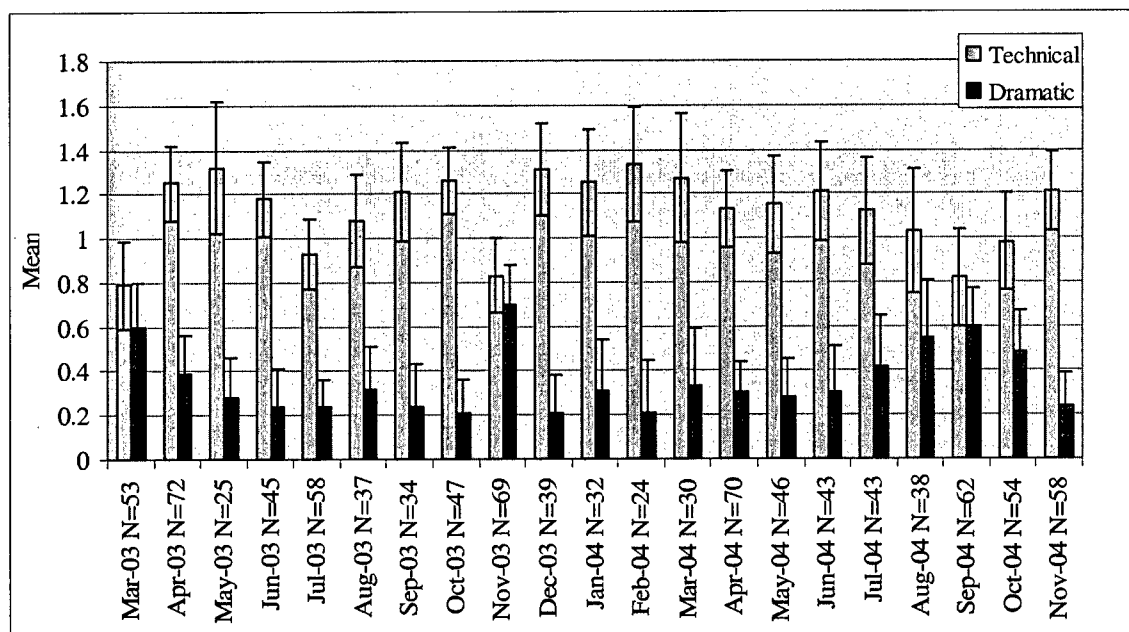


Figure 4.7: Technical versus Dramatic Coverage by Month<sup>aa</sup>

<sup>aa</sup> All media combined.

### *Effects of Increasing U.S. Deaths on Media Coverage*

The number of U.S. military deaths in Iraq per month and the cumulative number of deaths per month were entered into SPSS with the mean coverage for the four primary frames under study. A Spearman's Rho correlation test indicated that deaths per month were significantly correlated only with technical ( $\rho = -.486$ ) and dramatic ( $\rho = .543$ ) coverage. Cumulative deaths were not significantly correlated with media coverage. These results would seem to indicate that news media coverage of U.S. military deaths in Iraq was, for the most part, unaffected by the actual number of deaths, regardless of how many U.S. military members died during a particular month or how many total deaths had occurred since the start of the war. Rather, coverage remained predominantly an accounting of the deaths only. Perhaps this was the result of internal policy decisions within the media organizations themselves about how they would cover U.S. deaths. Or perhaps it was the result of external policy decisions from the White House or Department of Defense regarding how information about U.S. deaths would be released. These questions deserve further exploration, but it is not within the scope of this study to do so.

### *Effects of U.S. Deaths in Iraq on U.S. Public Opinion*

The public opinion weighted averages were also entered into SPSS with the number of U.S. military deaths in Iraq per month, and the cumulative number of deaths per month. A Spearman's Rho correlation test indicated significant correlations between the cumulative number of deaths per month and each of the public opinion questions (see Table 4.2), but no significant correlations between the number of deaths per month and any of the public opinion questions.

Cumulative Deaths	Presidential Approval	President's Handling of Iraq	War Worth It	War Right Decision
Rho	-.438	-.867	-.920	-.931
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000

Table 4.2: Correlations between Cumulative Deaths and Public Opinion Questions

These correlations would seem to indicate that the public is very much interested in the total number of U.S. military deaths in Iraq, but does not necessarily pay as much attention to the daily reports or monthly totals. The weaker correlation between cumulative deaths and presidential approval ratings would also indicate that the public considers more than just U.S. military deaths in Iraq when asked to give an overall opinion about the president's job performance. While the casualties hypothesis would allow for other influencing factors in items such as presidential approval, this much weaker correlation runs counter to its simple claims that the U.S. public will not tolerate the loss of U.S. military lives. Obviously, there are other factors which influence public opinion and public support for military operations. However, the correlation between cumulative deaths and the public opinion questions do indicate that there could indeed be a magic number, or a breaking point, which once reached, would lead to the U.S. public demanding the return of U.S. troops from Iraq. Figures 4.6 and 4.7 provide a clearer picture of the influence of U.S. military deaths on public opinion over time.

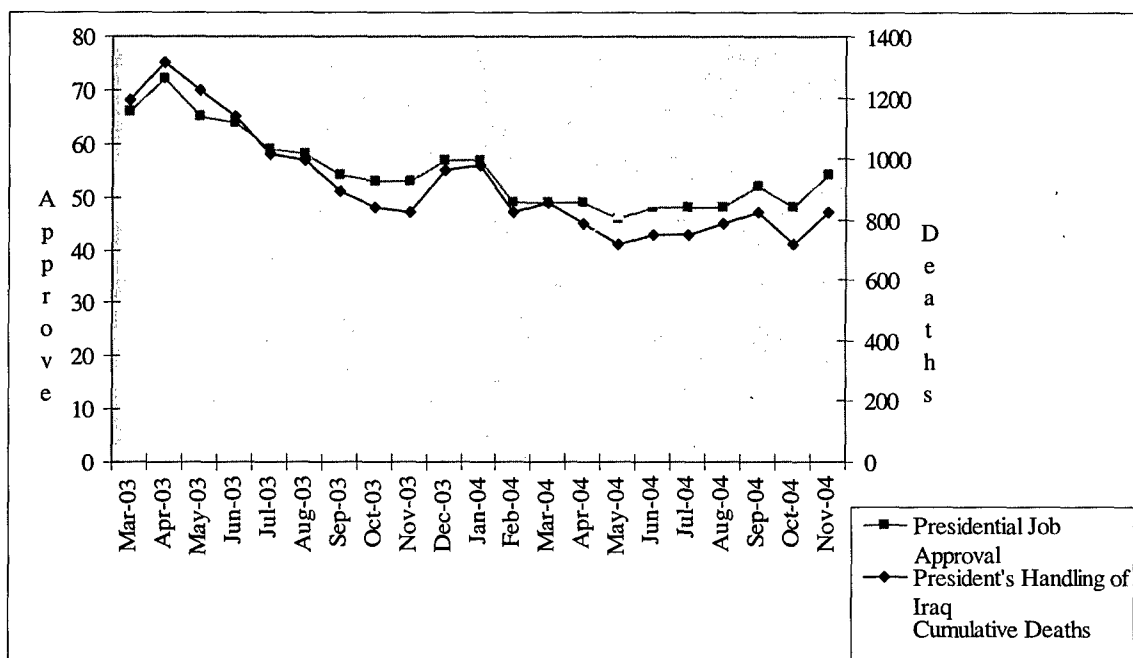


Figure 4.8: Effects of Cumulative Deaths on Presidential Approval Ratings

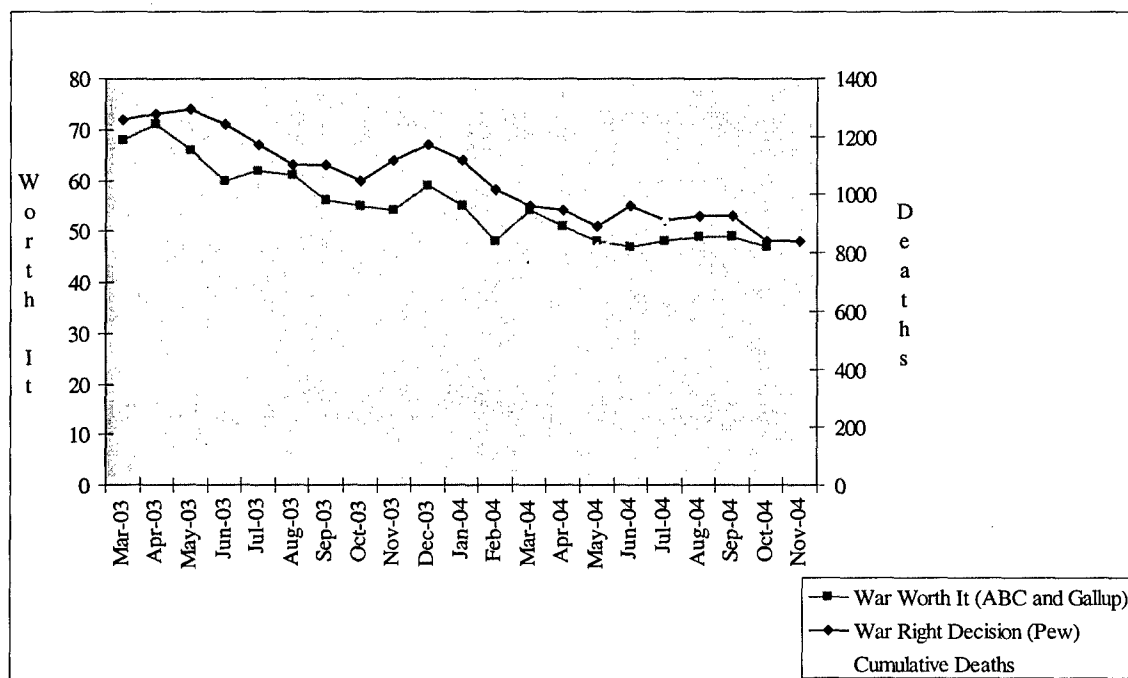


Figure 4.9: Effects of Cumulative Deaths on Public Opinion Regarding the War

As figures 4.8 and 4.9 indicate, there are some instances in which presidential approval ratings fluctuate that do not appear to be attributable to the number of deaths, or in fact trend counter to the expected direction given the death toll. These spikes can be at least partially explained by looking at some of the significant events that occurred during those time periods. An example would be the president's high approval rating in March 2003, the beginning of the war, and the subsequent drop in his job approval rating the next month which is typical of a Rally Effect. Additionally, a rise in his approval rating in December 2003 might be at least partially attributable to the capture of Sadaam Hussein. He appears to receive a bounce following the Republican National Convention and another immediately following the 2004 presidential election. Table 4.3 outlines some of the key events that occurred during the time period analyzed.

Month / Year	Event
March, 2003	Start of War
May, 2003	Declaration of end to major hostilities
December, 2003	Capture of Sadaam Hussein
April, 2004	First U.S.-led assault on Falluja, 135 deaths
June, 2004	Transfer of authority to Iraqi Interim Government
August 30-September 2, 2004	Republican national convention
November 4, 2004	U.S. presidential election

Table 4.3: Significant events during time period of analysis

#### Effects of Media Coverage of U.S. Deaths on Public Opinion

A Spearman's Rho correlation test was conducted to determine the relationship between the primary frames under study and the four public opinion questions. Interestingly, the episodic frame was significantly correlated with the presidential job approval rating ( $\rho = -.449$ , Sig. 2-tailed = .042), but no other significant correlations

were found. These results indicate that it may not necessarily be the news media's coverage of U.S. military deaths in Iraq, but rather the actual deaths, that influence public opinion regarding the president and the war.

## Conclusions

News media coverage of U.S. military deaths in Iraq has been predominantly episodic and technical in nature, almost a simple accounting for the numbers and names without additional context, personalization, sensationalism, or even debate about whether the war is worth the lives of U.S. military members. In fact, given that news media coverage of deaths accounted for only about 11 percent of the total coverage of the war, it is clear that the media did not focus on U.S. deaths very much at all. These findings tend to run counter to the casualties hypothesis which states simply that the U.S. public will not tolerate the loss of U.S. military lives. While the cumulative number of deaths are significantly correlated with the public opinion questions, the fact is that the public was still rather evenly divided on whether they believed the war was worth it, and they re-elected the president for a second term, even with the U.S. death toll in Iraq rising above 1,000 two months before the election. However, the correlations between the cumulative number of U.S. deaths in Iraq and public perception about and support for the war are significant and are not trivial. The results clearly indicate that a magic number quite possibly exists, a number at which the American public will cry out, "enough! Bring the troops home."

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study was the lack of a clear relationship between the nature of the new media's coverage of U.S. military deaths in Iraq and public opinion. Perhaps if the media are merely reporting the facts as they occur,

the public is indeed forming their own opinions about the situation in Iraq, influenced by the real-world events and not by the media.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents the main conclusions of the study as well as issues related to theory and research design. In addition, public policy implications and suggestions for future research considerations are discussed.

#### Review of Major Findings

#### *Strengths and Weaknesses of Research Design*

The research design employed proved an effective way in which to examine the question of media coverage of U.S. military deaths in Iraq. A content analysis of a shorter time period could have resulted in a larger sample size, or perhaps in a sample from more news organizations; however, it would not have provided as complete a picture of the overall coverage of U.S. deaths through many significant events such as the capture of Sadaam Hussein, the first (and second) U.S.-led assault on Falluja in which more military members died than at any other time, the transfer of authority to the interim Iraqi government, and the U.S. presidential election. The real value of this study is that it demonstrates a consistent use of episodic and technical frames by the media when covering U.S. military deaths in Iraq regardless of the actual number of deaths incurred in a specific month, during a specific engagement, or even the total number of deaths since the beginning of the war. It also allows us to take a closer look at public opinion trends over time in an effort to more clearly see the factors influence that opinion. For example,



early in 2003, at the beginning of the war, we see presidential approval ratings around 70 percent. This can most likely be attributed to a Rally Effect. We see approval then come back down, as one would expect after the Rally Effect, but it still remained fairly high throughout the remainder of the period under study. We can also see influences on public opinion such as the capture of Hussein in December 2003 or the heavy U.S. death tolls incurred during the assaults on Falluja in April and November 2004. Only toward the last few months of 2004, did public approval begin to slip below the 50 percent mark, yet President Bush was still re-elected with a comfortable majority, very much unlike his contested victory in 2000.

Perhaps more important though, was the lack of significant correlations between the media coverage of U.S. deaths in Iraq and public approval of the president or whether the public felt the war was worth it. Rather, it appears real-world events, such as the actual total number of deaths and other significant events during the war, were exerting the influence on public attitudes.

A content analysis conducted over a shorter period of time would not have been able to as effectively capture this kind of data thus limiting our understanding about media coverage and public opinion over time. However, analyzing news transcripts from a shorter period would have allowed for a larger sample size from that period, lowering our expected margin of error, and it would have also allowed for samples to be taken from more news organizations for more detailed comparisons. While this design did not prove as effective for analyzing coverage by month due to smaller sample sizes, the purpose of the study was to examine media coverage in a longitudinal manner. Another limiting factor in this study was the use of the key-word search in Lexis-Nexis. The need

to read more than 7,000 transcripts to weed out those that did not specifically address U.S. deaths was a clear sign that the key-words were not adequate. If more time had been available, further combinations of key words would have been tested until a more refined key-word search could have been accomplished. The resulting analysis, however, did provide an adequate sample for developing a better understanding of the frames news media employed when covering U.S. deaths, but it did not allow for determining the total proportion of coverage about the war in Iraq given to U.S. deaths, which was the first research question. Therefore, that question remains unanswered. The results do seem to indicate, however, that coverage of U.S. deaths was not necessarily disproportionate to the actual number of U.S. deaths, but rather was simply an accounting of those deaths. However, further research on this question would have to be accomplished to draw any real conclusions.

The inter-coder reliability coefficients indicate the coding scheme employed for this study did effectively and consistently capture data regarding news media coverage of U.S. military deaths in Iraq, and therefore could be modified for use in future research on media coverage of similar public or foreign policy topics. Additional coder training and more frequent reliability tests during the coding process would most likely have improved the reliability coefficients even more. Therefore, those considerations should be applied when conducting any future research using this coding tool.

A micro-analysis of a public opinion survey would have been helpful as well to better determine correlations between media use and public attitudes. A survey such as one conducted by the Pew Center or the Gallup organization, with a sufficiently large sample size, could allow researchers to examine correlations between those who report

watching or reading a lot of news and their attitudes toward the president or the war in Iraq versus those who report that they do not watch or read very much news. This type of a study will not allow for a longitudinal exploration of correlations over time, but in the case of this study, such an analysis could have provided more information about the factors influencing presidential approval or whether the war was worth it, and interactions between different influencers could have been tested providing a more complete picture of the dynamics of public opinion.

### *Implications of Findings*

The findings of this study do lend support to the casualties hypothesis in that a negative correlation was found between the total number of U.S. military deaths in Iraq and public opinion regarding the president or whether the war was worth it. However, in the case of the war in Iraq, those correlations appear to be somewhat weaker than one might expect given the recent literature on the casualties hypothesis and recent public outcries regarding the deployments of U.S. troops to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Somalia, and Haiti. Still, they are not trivial, and clearly casualties do impact public support for military operations to some extent. The findings do suggest, however, that there must also be other influencing factors on public opinion.

A common mantra within the military community since the U.S. war in Vietnam is, "blame the media for the loss of public support." These findings, however, suggest that the media are not necessarily to blame, or at least not completely to blame.

The most important finding of this study to foreign policy decision makers and military planners is that the American public will apparently tolerate U.S. casualties, and specifically U.S. deaths, under certain circumstances. It is not within the scope of this

study to draw any conclusions about what those circumstances are or what other factors influence public support, but it is certainly evident that the casualties hypothesis is itself too simple a statement to be consistently true. This is in no way a green light for policy makers and planners to randomly apply military force in any situation without carefully considering the effect casualties will have on their political careers, but it should instill some confidence that there are indeed some cases in which the American public still believes the use of military force is acceptable.

The implications of this study's findings to the military's strategic communication planning are significant. While federal and military regulations and policies govern the manner in which casualty notifications are made and publicly reported, it is important to military planners to understand that those regulations, and the news media's apparent willingness to not challenge them, could indeed be somewhat mitigating the negative effects of such information on public support for the war. In other words, the episodic and technical manner in which the Pentagon releases, and the news media reports information about casualties may in fact dampen the impact of that information on the public's perception about the war. These conclusions are extremely important to message management in times of divided public support.

These results should also instill some confidence in the U.S. news media for military planners. These findings would seem to indicate that at least some of the military's fears that the news media only focus on deaths and not the other, more positive aspects of military operations such as humanitarian efforts, are perhaps unfounded. And as the frequently tense relationship between the military and the media of an open society

continues to evolve, perhaps a greater sense of trust can develop between the two seemingly adversarial, yet forced-together partners.

#### Suggestions for Future Research

During the course of this study, several items of interest were discovered, yet there was not enough time to thoroughly explore all of them. First, to take the New York Times as an example, the initial key-word search resulted in more than 4,000 transcripts for the 23 months in the analysis. The first analysis, however, weeded out all but 1,300 as irrelevant to the study. The seeming majority of those articles excluded dealt with Iraqi military and civilian casualties. It was not within the scope of this study to explore the nature of coverage of those casualties, nor the relationships between that coverage and U.S. public opinion. The impression, though, is that the American public, or at least the American media, was concerned with Iraqi deaths as much or more than U.S. deaths, and therefore the topic needs to be researched further.

Second, the impetus for this study was the seemingly high public approval ratings of the president's job performance just before the 2004 election given the fact that the U.S. death toll in Iraq had exceeded 1,000. The frame of reference employed when considering that information was the public's apparent lack of tolerance for a relatively few deaths in Somalia. The terrorists attacks of September 11, 2001, could have had a lot of influence on the public's apparent new willingness to accept casualties, but it is difficult to say, and certainly no conclusions of that sort can be drawn from this study. However, it might be helpful to analyze media coverage of the U.S. deaths in Somalia using the same coding scheme employed here, and then compare that coverage to the findings of this content analysis. In fact, given the propensity for foreign policy makers

and military leaders to blame the media, a comparison of media coverage of the later years of the Vietnam war and the U.S. deployments to Lebanon, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Haiti may also be helpful to understanding the problem of public support for military operations.

A very important question is raised by the results of this study. Why was the media coverage of U.S. deaths in Iraq predominantly episodic and technical in nature? Was it a purposeful policy decision made by media owners or managers? Was it a result of the availability of information and sources to the media? Was it the result of some policy of the current presidential administration? Perhaps reporters feared they would be labeled "unpatriotic" if they criticized the war because of U.S. deaths. Or, it is possible that reporters had little access to the battlefield, and therefore relied upon Pentagon press briefings or releases for information about U.S. casualties. These questions need further study, perhaps through interviews with some of the reporters who wrote the stories analyzed here, if we are to better understand the decisions that were made and the constraints under which reporters gathered and presented information about U.S. deaths in Iraq.

Similarly, why did the number of U.S. deaths in Iraq not deal a "death blow" to the administration's re-election prospects? How is it that the president was re-elected with a comfortable majority, particularly when he made the war and national security the centerpiece of his campaign? What other factors influenced voter opinion? It is possible that the media in some way mitigated the effects of U.S. deaths on public opinion by reporting them in an episodic and technical nature. It is also possible that media attention

to other aspects of the war, such as the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Graib, served to keep the public's attention away from the death toll.

Another avenue for research deals with how local media coverage in communities that include military installations would differ from the national scene? One might expect local coverage to be more thematic and dramatic in nature due to proximity. How too would coverage differ between local media organizations around different types of installations or different types of military units? For example, would coverage in communities near Wright-Patterson Air Force Base differ from coverage in communities near the Fort Bragg Army post, or what about flying units versus special operations units? And, especially relevant in the war with Iraq, how does local coverage of deaths in National Guard or Reserve units differ from the national media?

Additionally, the evolving relationship between the U.S. military and the news media demands further study. The media embed policy in the war with Iraq; the Department of Defense policy prohibiting news coverage of flag-draped caskets being flown into Dover Air Force Base; the access provided non-embedded journalists to war zones; and the implications of journalists now being taken hostage, killed, or being used by terrorist organizations or even U.S. policy makers and military planners to send messages, deceive the other, or in an effort to directly impact public opinion all are deserving of thorough investigation. How the media report on wars, and how they are used by the parties engaged in the wars appears to be a rapidly changing process in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This study examined a piece of this seemingly new mosaic, but more, much more, needs to be accomplished to better understand the role of the news media in shaping public support for military operations.

**APPENDIX A**  
**NEWS MEDIA FRAMES CODING SHEET AND INSTRUCTIONS**



## **Types of Frames:**

**TECHNICAL FRAME:** Factual coverage of U.S. military deaths without dramatization or personalization. Raw numbers, detail of events, lists of names, ages, hometowns, etc.

**DRAMATIC FRAME:** Coverage of U.S. military deaths including subjective qualifiers such as: horrible, terrible, increasingly violent, deadly, unnecessary, wasteful, unexpected, etc. Personalization of casualties such as human-interest type coverage of surviving family members, mourning communities, lost potential, etc. Can also be positive qualifiers such as brave, heroic, courageous, pride, loyalty, sacrifice, etc. Also, presence of political / policy debate.

**EPISODIC FRAME:** Report of U.S. military deaths as isolated event absent of context about overall war effort, escalating violence, political debate, etc.

### *Examples:*

#### **Episodic / Technical**

- Lists of names, ages, hometowns
- Two U.S. soldiers were killed in Falluja today when their vehicle was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade.
- "Based on a preliminary examination, U.S. officials believe nine of 11 bodies found this week at an Iraqi hospital are those of American soldiers. The remains are being flown to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware for identification. So far in the war, officially, 57 U.S. troops and 27 British have been killed. In addition, seven Americans are prisoners of war, and 15 are missing in action. Iraqi casualties, military and civilian, not known" (CBS Evening News, April 4, 2003).

#### **Episodic / Dramatic**

- Personification, human interest angle – surviving family, mourning community, etc.
- "Ft. Bliss mourned today as the harsh news sunk in: more of their soldiers confirmed killed in action. They'd been missing since their unit was ambushed two weeks ago. The 507<sup>th</sup> was not a combat unit. Its soldiers are mechanics, technicians, even cooks. Now seven of their bodies have been identified, added to two already known dead from that battle. Now the funerals for the 507<sup>th</sup> have begun and the grief mixed with pride" (CBS Evening News, April 6, 2003).

**THEMATIC FRAME:** Report of U.S. military deaths within context of overall war effort, escalating violence, political debate, etc. Casualties reported with total number of U.S. deaths, death rate, "deadliest day" (or week or month), etc.

*Examples:*

#### **Thematic / Technical**

- "One soldier in this division was killed by a sniper's bullet today, as the division consolidated its positions on a broad plateau north of Najaf before what is expected to be a strong assault on Baghdad. After pushing deep into Iraq over three days, the division's units continued to clash with small pockets of Iraqi forces in and around their positions. There were few indications that the division's armored brigades were prepared to move forward. Instead, the soldiers and officers concentrated on establishing security over dozens of miles of scrub desert and on bringing up food, water and other supplies after the march northward from the Kuwaiti border...." (New York Times, March 25, 2003).

#### **Thematic / Dramatic**

- "An angry President Bush insisted today Iraq is not disarming. The chances for war, possibly in six to eight weeks, are growing. Already, a kind of hit-and-run war is being waged just south of the Iraqi border in Kuwait. So far, most of the casualties are Americans. There was a deadly new terror attack here today, and for the first time, the targets were military-connected civilians..... Terrible, but only the latest attack on Americans in Kuwait in three months, attacks the U.S. ambassador to Kuwait called acts of terrorism. October 8<sup>th</sup>, a U.S. Marine was shot and killed, another wounded by Muslim extremists. November 21<sup>st</sup>, two servicemen were shot and wounded by a Kuwaiti policeman. And January 17<sup>th</sup>, local investigators announced the arrest of a Kuwaiti National Guardsman, an alleged Iraqi spy plotting to poison the food supply of U.S. troops based in Kuwait. But this latest case, where U.S. investigators rushed in, raises the stakes for 8,000 American civilians living and working in Kuwait..." (CBS Evening News, January 21, 2003).

**V1. ITEM #** \_\_\_\_\_ **V2. CODER** \_\_\_\_\_

**V3. NEWS ORGANIZATION**

1. New York Times
2. USA Today
3. CBS
4. NBC
5. CNN
6. Fox

**V4. YEAR** \_\_\_\_\_ **V5. MONTH** \_\_\_\_\_ **V6. DAY** \_\_\_\_\_

**V7. ARTICLE / TRANSCRIPT UNRELATED** \_\_\_\_\_  
(ENTER '1' IF UNRELATED, DO NOT CONTINUE CODING)

**V8. ARTICLE / TRANSCRIPT LENGTH (# of words)** \_\_\_\_\_

**V9. FORMAT**  
(Choose One)

1. News Article
2. Opinion Editorial
3. In-House Editorial
4. Columnist (regular)
5. Letter-to-the-editor
6. Primarily Interview w/ public figure
7. Primarily Interview w/ reporter or commentator
8. News Report
9. Other \_\_\_\_\_

**V10. FOCUS OF ARTICLE / TRANSCRIPT**

1. Main Focus War Coverage
2. Main Focus Domestic Politics (General Discussion)
3. Main Focus International Relations / Politics
4. Main Focus U.S. Presidential Campaign
5. Main Focus Other \_\_\_\_\_

### **V11. PROMINENCE OF STORY**

"0" Not Lead Story / Front Page, "1" Lead Story / Front Page, "9" Unable to Determine

0                      1                      9

### **V12. PROMINENCE OF EPISODIC FRAME**

"0" Not Present, "1" Present, "2" Outstanding Focus, Lead

0                      1                      2

### **V13. PROMINENCE OF THEMATIC FRAME**

"0" Not Present, "1" Present, "2" Outstanding Focus, Lead

0                      1                      2

### **V14. PROMINENCE OF TECHNICAL FRAME**

"0" Not Present, "1" Present, "2" Outstanding Focus, Lead

0                      1                      2

### **V15. PROMINENCE OF DRAMATIC FRAME**

"0" Not Present, "1" Present, "2" Outstanding Focus, Lead

0                      1                      2

### **V15a. NEGATIVE VALENCE OF DRAMATIC FRAME**

"0" Not Present, "1" Present, "2" Outstanding Focus, Lead

0                      1                      2

**V15b. POSITIVE VALENCE OF DRAMATIC FRAME**

“0” Not Present, “1” Present, “2” Outstanding Focus, Lead

0                      1                      2

**V16. PROMINENCE OF PRESIDENT BUSH’S DECLARATION OF END TO HOSTILITIES**

“0” Not Present, “1” Present, “2” Outstanding Focus, Lead

0                      1                      2

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